

Frequently Asked Questions Acute Hepatitis B Outbreak, Ocean County August 31, 2009

What is the current situation at the outpatient hematology/oncology practice in Ocean County?

- In late February 2009, investigators from the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services (NJDHSS) and the Ocean County Health Department (OCHD), in consultation with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) began to investigate cases of hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection; all cases involved persons who: (1) did not have typical risk factors for hepatitis B and (2) received care from the same outpatient medical setting, giving rise to concerns that these cases are healthcare-associated.
- Since beginning the investigation, NJDHSS and OCHD have identified cases of HBV infection among persons who were seen at the practice.

Which practice are we talking about?

- Dr. Parvez Dara's offices at 214 Commons Way, Toms River, NJ, and 70 Lacey Road, Whiting, NJ.

How were these cases of hepatitis B discovered?

- A physician reported two of the cases and public health authorities identified additional cases by reviewing reports captured by New Jersey's electronic disease reporting system.
- New Jersey law requires that healthcare providers notify public health officials when they identify certain diseases, including hepatitis B.

Did the health care worker(s) do something to put their patients at risk for exposure?

- Staff at the practice provided care in a manner that put patients at risk for the spread of infectious diseases (such as hepatitis B and C viruses, and HIV). The investigation revealed that the practice did not follow good infection control practices to prevent transmission of these viruses from patient to patient.

Why were patients not notified sooner?

- Patients were notified as quickly as possible once we had gathered enough information during the course of our investigation.

Is there one patient, physician or health care worker to blame for these infections?

- Transmission may have occurred because several staff did not adhere to appropriate infection control practices. Once these practices were recognized and brought to the attention of the physician, the office was closed so that problems with infection control could be adequately addressed.

Is the problem still going on?

- The offices remain closed and the physician's license to practice medicine has been temporarily suspended by the NJ Board of Medical Examiners.
- As it can take several months for the symptoms of hepatitis B to appear, additional cases may be identified despite no ongoing transmission of disease.

How many cases of hepatitis B were discovered during the investigation?

- It was determined that 108 (this number includes the original 5 case patients) patients of the medical practice tested positive for the presence of hepatitis B virus or antibodies in their blood.
- As a result of the investigation, 19 patients with acute cases (recent infection) of HBV and 10 patients with chronic cases (ongoing infection) were found to be associated with the implicated practice, as these cases had not other identifiable risk factor for HBV. The other 68 positive cases are considered possible cases; therefore we can only say that they are possibly related to this outbreak.

How many cases of hepatitis C were discovered during the investigation?

- It was determined that 16 (1.1%) of former patients of the medical practice tested positive for hepatitis C or antibodies in their blood.
- There is a separate hepatitis C investigation underway.

How many cases of HIV were discovered during the investigation?

- The investigation did not uncover any cases of HIV among those people who received letters and who were tested.

How many people who received the first letter tested negative?

- Notification letters were sent to 2860 persons; a total of 1394 of these were tested. Of those 1394 whom we know were tested, 1283 (92%) tested negative for blood borne pathogens or have pending test results.
- However because the virus may not be detected for some time, follow-up testing is recommended six months from the last date of treatment at the medical practice to confirm a negative test result.

What proof do you have that people were infected with hepatitis during medical procedures at the doctor's office?

- The investigation revealed that the patients who tested positive for acute hepatitis did not have traditional risk factors for hepatitis B infection and all had received treatment at the same hematology/oncology practice during the incubation period.
- The investigation revealed that there were breaches in infection control practices that are known to be associated with patient-to-patient transmission of viruses such as hepatitis B.
- Tests performed by the CDC showed that the virus in 7 out of 8 blood samples were 99.9 – 100% identical matches (DNA matches); the other one blood sample had genetic similarities. These laboratory results suggest that these cases share a common origin and are linked.

Why weren't all of the specimens tested for DNA?

- The CDC has received many of the blood samples for testing. However, the CDC was not able to perform testing on all of the patients involved in this investigation. In some cases, we could not obtain the specimen from the laboratory that performed the initial tests on the blood. In some cases, there was not enough blood left to perform this special test. In many cases, the virus was no longer circulating in the patient's blood at the time the specimen was drawn; these individuals were recuperating from the infection or had already recuperated from the infection.

I received a second letter urging me to get tested. I was tested after receiving the first letter. Should I get tested again?

- If you were tested earlier and received negative test results (approx. six months ago), you should contact your health care provider to discuss follow-up testing to confirm that you are still negative. This is because hepatitis B and the other viruses have an incubation period (length of time a disease is in the body before a person feels/looks sick) of up to six months.
- If your provider recommends follow-up testing, he/she should write you a prescription for testing.
- If you do not have a health care provider, you may get a referral from your insurance company or from a referral service
- If you do not have health insurance, you may access health services at a local health center. Use this link to locate a list of health centers near you: <http://www.njpca.org/FQHC/directory.aspx>

Why are people just notified about getting tested? Weren't letters sent out in the spring? Why am I just now getting a letter?

- The first wave of letters were mailed to patients from the practice from 2006-2009. Patient addresses for 2006-2009 were available electronically, which made the process of notifying persons quicker. Patient addresses dating back to 2002 were accessed with assistance from health insurers.

What is the difference between the letters mailed out in the spring and the most recent letters?

- Both letters alert patients about a possible exposure to blood borne viruses, including hepatitis B; and recommends testing for these viruses.
- In March, 2009, letters were mailed to patients who were seen at the practice from January 1, 2006 and March 3, 2009. In August 2009, letters were mailed to patients who were seen at the practice between January 1, 2002 and December 31, 2005 and those patients who received letters in the spring who did not get tested.

What took so long getting the letters out?

- Initially our investigation was focused on patients who received treatment at the practice from 2006-2009 who may have been exposed to blood borne viruses. However, upon further investigation, it was determined that patients who received care from 2002-2005 may also be at risk.
- Patient addresses from 2006-2009 were available electronically, which made the process of notifying persons quicker. Patient addresses dating back to 2002 were accessed with assistance from health insurers. Getting addresses from insurance providers was a lengthy process. Patients were notified as quickly as their information was made available.
- There is no way to confirm if our patient contact lists are complete, therefore if patients received treatment at the practice at 214 Commons Way in Toms River or 70 Lacey Road in Whiting, at anytime from January 1, 2002 through March 2, 2009, we recommend that they contact their health care provider to get tested and determine their next steps.

If I was a patient at the practice in 2002, wouldn't I know if I had hepatitis by now?

- No. People with hepatitis may be asymptomatic (no signs/symptoms of disease). The only way to know if you are infected with the hepatitis virus is to get tested.

What is the state doing so that this doesn't happen again

- NJDHSS created a "Safe Injection Practices" document to educate medical providers about infection control and the appropriate use of invasive equipment. This document will be circulated to all medical providers in the state and posted on the NJDHSS website.